Stone's First Report from the Soviet Union

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A Visit to Moscow: Part One

I

"It's like a visit to the moon," said the awed chambermaid in Tel Aviv. She was from Shanghai, the daughter of Russians who had fled the Revolution at the very outset. I needed someone who spoke Russian to call the Soviet Embassy in Ramat Gan about my visa. Excited by the contact, almost frightened, she was telephoning to ask whether word had yet come from Moscow about *Gospodin* Stone. . . .

And now there I was in the low-walled Finnish airport at Helsinki waiting for the Soviet plane to Moscow. My first glimpse of "Russia" was a rosy-cheeked plump bright eyed little blonde employ of Aerflot, the Soviet airline. Two well-dressed Orientals, one elderly, one young, were also waiting; they turned out later to be Japanese diplomats on their way to negotiate a fisheries agreement with the Russians. Then, just a few minutes before our plane was called, a gay party of men and women arrived, the latter loaded down with flowers.

At 3 p.m., we filed aboard a two-engined Il-12. There were seven rows of seats, doubles on one side of the aisle, singles on the other, 21 in all. The seats were newly upholstered, with fresh linen headrests, large and comfortable, but the worn safety belts indicated that this was not new equipment. I fastened my belt a little apprehensively, remembering what I had read somewhere about the swift take-offs and landings of Soviet pilots, but what I had read turned out to be wrong. At 3:15, exactly on schedule, we made a smooth start. Below us was the black and white northern landscape, the dark firs and the bright snow. We were on our way to the Soviet Union.

No One Checked Our Seat Belts

There was much joyful visiting back and forth in the aisles even during the take-off, and everybody seemed to be talking at once; the Russian sounded pleasantly liquid and musical. There was no loud speaker greeting from the pilot in several languages as on American and West European planes; no one checked to see whether we had fastened our seat belts. Wire racks overhead held our overcoat and hats. The interior of the cabin was a freshly painted white and blue. The engines throbbed and labored, the cabin rattled slightly. Across the aisle two young men morosely read the Paris edition of the New York *Herald-Tribune;* their clothes and appearance marked them as Americans, the dirty U.S. mail bags squeezed in behind them indicated that they were diplomatic couriers. Heavy clouds curtained off the earth below us and we fell asleep.

The feeling that the plane was coming down awakened us. It was 4:30 and we were about to land in Leningrad. Below us there was a landscape which seemed to be chiefly mud, a flat endless plain with a few dirty patches of snow and some bare wintry trees. The first distant glimpse of Leningrad's outskirts was of new apartment houses set wide apart. We came down on a paved cement airstrip and taxied to a stop near a handsome stone air terminal with Leningrad written across the top of the entrance in Russian letters. Aerflot officials and porters in blue uniforms were waiting; the porters wore butcher aprons over their uniforms. Everybody stayed in their seats on the plane. Three officials came on board. One took our passports. We were in Russia.

The first impression looking out the window and coming off the plane was that we had arrived in the land of the rotund and the retrousse. Everybody seemed to be round—round of face, round of figure. Everybody seemed to carry a dignified, comfortable paunch in front of him and everybody seemed to have a turned up nose. The second impression, as we followed airline officials into an airport waiting room for customs and currency control, was how old-fashioned everything seemed to be. The waiting room, lit by two chandeliers, was full of heavy stuffed mid-Victorian furniture protected by fresh linen dustcovers; the decor everywhere was *bourgeois.* As we looked about we thought that while Stalin might be dead, Queen Victoria certainly lived on here. The third impression, as we began to make out forms and go through controls, was of friendliness, not obsequious as in Germany or ostentatiously polite as in England, but a plain kind of simple man-to-man friendliness.

Any Hashish or Antlers?

The forms were lengthy, legal size, two pages, full of strange questions. I rapidly copied out a few samples. The visitor was asked whether he had to declare among his possessions:

"7. Wormwood heads and seeds.

"8. Opium, hashish, as well as pipes and other devices for their use.

"9. Horns of steppe antelopes, Manchurian deer, unstuffed horns of maral and spotted deer."

A pleasant young woman, speaking fairly good English, came over and asked if I needed any help with the form. I pointed to Item 8 about hashish and said, "I don't smoke." She giggled. I asked her to explain another question which said, "Besides luggage presented for custom examination, I have/do not have slow luggage consisting of —— packages." I wanted to know what "slow" luggage was. After a while, with some aid from pantomine, I discovered it was luggage which was coming by boat or train.

After filling out the form, I went out into the high marble walled (even Washington does not seem to have quite as much marble as I saw in Russia) main hall of the terminal and looked around. In one corner, apparently as inevitable under communism as under capitalism, was a souvenir stand tended by a lady in a fur cap. In a glass case were jewelry, small bottles of perfume, the usual station knick-knacks. The only thing

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different was the abacus on the counter; this proved to be standard equipment everywhere in Russia; even beside modern cash registers one saw the abacus.

Walls A La Wedgewood

On one side of the station wall over the heavy carved doors leading to the airfield was a bas relief of the Aerflot network, covering the U.S.S.R. and China, with its most southerly point at Kabul in Afghanistan. An official came to summon us to dinner as we were looking around. He led us up dark heavily carpeted mahogany stairs past an old-fashioned oval mirror of the kind before which Tolstoy's Katya might have primped, onto the second floor of the airport. There in a small room just off the main dining hall we were served a full course dinner. I shared a table with the Japanese diplomats and then went out to have a look around. The main dining hall, in which high Soviet Army officers were being served by poorly dressed waiters, was heavily opulent, encircled by white marble pillars. The walls had bas reliefs of soldiers, sailors and workers but done in a neo-classical style like Wedgewood figures, white on blue. There were old-fashioned mahogany sideboards along the walls with glassware and china in them. At one end was a bar with liquor, caviar, candy, cigarettes and the inevitable abacus. Outside, near the stairs, were the wash rooms, marked in English as well as Russian, with three lady attendants by the doors, one a *babushka* with a kerchief over her head.

Downstairs again an officer returned our passports. No effort was made to check on our currency declarations; there was no sign of a baggage search by customs. No questions were asked about the purpose of my visit to Russia, where I expected to go or whom I would see. (I didn't realize this absence of questioning until I reached England on my way back and was asked by the passport officer what I had been doing on the Continent, whom I was going to see in England, what my business was, and what kind of paper I wrote for; my papers and notebooks were gone over and the books in my luggage examined.) We left Leningrad at 7 p.m. sharp, heading south for Moscow over a dreary flat winter landscape.

We Meet A Soviet Magician

The plane was bitterly cold on leaving, and as it warmed up so did the passengers. The gay party I noticed in the air terminal at Helsinki turned out to be a Russian vaudeville troupe which had been on a good will tour in Finland. They were on their way back to Moscow and had imbibed freely in Leningrad. When I noticed one of them borrow a *Herald-Tribune* from one of the two American couriers on the plane, I struck up a conversation in English and German. He told me he was a "zauber" (German for magician) and added modestly, "They say I am best *zauber* in Soviet Union. I don't know, maybe not but that's what they say." He said the troupe contained two "beautiful" singers, a balalaika player, two jugglers, a concertina player and a pianist. The magician said he was from Georgia, "very beautiful country, very beautiful because between two seas, Caspian and Black." His name was Chitaschwini and he had been in Moscow for 15 years. He had performed all over Scandinavia and the Soviet bloc, including North Vietnam and China, and hoped some day to visit America, "I have very good tricks." He wanted me to come see him perform in Moscow but didn't know where he would be booked next. "It's very hard," he said, meaning the problem of bookings.

The plump stewardess brought around hot tea, cookies and candy. Everybody, including the two American couriers, were "visiting" all over the plane. The concertina player sat down beside one of the couriers to ask help with his English lesson. The pianist came back to join me and the magician; his name was Ashkenazi, he spoke a little German. "Me Georgian," said the magician, "my friend Ivri (Jewish). We both same in Soviet Union." He demonstrated the equality with a gesture. Then he began to question me about the Negro problem and why visitors to America had to be fingerprinted. The pianist said he had played everywhere in the Soviet bloc, and all over the Middle East except in Israel. One of the American couriers said this talkative friendliness was a new development, and that a year or two earlier Americans or any other foreigners had found it impossible to strike up a conversation with Russians. By the time the lights of Moscow appeared below us right on schedule at 9 p.m. we were all old friends.

Stalin in Bronze and Oils

The Moscow airport was even more massive than Leningrad's and had even more marble. Its white walled main hall was three stories high and it was dominated by a huge bronze statue of Stalin. Stalin also stared down at us from a painting over the mantelpiece in the richly panelled waiting room into which we were ushered; the painting showed Stalin in white uniform, radiant in the setting sun. While the travelling vaudevillians were being greeted Russian style by their friends —the men as well as women kissing each other with rich warm smacks on both cheeks—we had a chance to look around.

There was the same old-fashioned middle class decor. On the big center table were copies of *New Times*, the international Soviet weekly, in English, French and German, and that day's issue of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. Their front pages were identical in makeup; the May Day statement of the Communist Party was spread across both in the same type and with the same headlines. On page two both carried the identical picture, in the identical position, of Eden greeting Krushchev and Bulganin. There were gayly colored copies of *People's China* in Russian and of a similar magazine from North Vietnam.

A friendly Intourist guide who had been notified by phone from Leningrad said that he had a car waiting for me. As we walked out I noticed that Stalin's book on the national question was on the book stall in the entrance hall along with books by Lenin, Marx and Engels. The guide translated for me the two big red banners stretched around the walls of the entrance hall. They said "Long Live the Great Soviet Union—the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. The Bulwark of Friendship and Glory of the Peoples of Our Country. The Indestructible Pillar of Peace for The Whole World."

The Avenues Are Immense

From the Intourist taxi which took us into Moscow we could see little in the darkness but what we saw was massive. A broad straight highway from the airport led past the high bulk of the new skyscraper university into a city of streets wider than any we had ever seen, immense arteries in which the traffic police seemed marionettes and pedestrians dodged miraculously in and out among the speeding cars. Here and

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there on the outer edges of the city one saw log houses sandwiched in amid the apartment houses, and darker areas in the alleys behind them. Traffic lights blinked on and off like ours; the movie theatres were doing a big business; the streets were crowded and the crowds were full of chatter. On our right we caught a glimpse of the dark bulk of the Kremlin walls as we drove up to the famous Metropol, a huge cavernous hotel filling a whole city block. A room had been reserved for us—at 47 rubles; by the legal rate of exchange, four rubles to the dollar, this was $11.75 per day.

A good-natured porter took our bags up to the fourth floor in the 1890-style lift and then down what seemed like a half mile of bare corridors to our room, or rather suite. There was a big sitting room with a radio (fixed to get only Radio Moscow). In the room was a mahogany chiffonier, a large desk, a big wardrobe, a central table with heavy tapestried cloth and frilly table lamp. The furnishings were ornate and tasteless. An alcove, curtained off, held a bed with another frilly lamp beside it. Next to this was a private bathroom, quite clean but poorly repaired. These were de luxe quarters, but there was no toilet tissue.

II

I had six wonderful days in Moscow and three in Warsaw —all that my limited means and tight printing schedule would allow. I managed with a dozen words of Russian, an Anglo-Russian dictionary, and a mixture of English, French, German and Yiddish to speak with many people, officially and unofficially, through organizations and casually, in the streets, parks, theatres, cafes and restaurants. I visited a *kolkhoz,* a collective farm just outside Moscow and I had a long interview with one of the Soviet jurists who is helping to revise the criminal code. I talked with Soviet journalists, with Communists and non-Communists. In Moscow I found people friendly and eager to talk but still afraid; Warsaw, on the other hand, was astounding in its frank speech. I had hoped by visiting Warsaw on my way back to sample the atmosphere of a satellite capital and see how it differed if any from Moscow. The differences were amazing, and provided unexpected perspective on the new developments in the Soviet world. I had no briefings at the U.S. Embassy either in Moscow or Warsaw, and only casual contacts with fellow Americans—I wanted my own fresh impressions rather than the second hand and I decided to write them after leaving Russia rather than trust to the precarious mercies of the often arbitrary and frustrating censorship which still exists there. And I want to report, for what little it may be worth, what I managed to see and hear and observe on my own.

No Real Uniformity Beneath The Surface

The people of Moscow and the kolkhoz outside it were a perpetual revelation. Beneath the monolithic dictatorship of a monolithic party in a country hermetically sealed off for a generation from any foreign news or contact of which the regime did not approve there was evident a wide variety of personality and viewpoint. Though I never had the feeling of complete frankness in any conversation in Moscow (unlike Warsaw), I heard enough to feel that all those years of control and molding had not produced a real uniformity of opinion. I found smooth careerists whose yesmanship was as slick as anything in Hollywood, devoted Communists with hopelessly rigid blinkers, and cynics who gave one the feeling of laughing up their sleeves at the monotonous patter of the dull, verbose and obscure Soviet press. There are fanatics whose faces turn black at the slightest criticism, deeply thoughtful and discontented people bursting to talk but still fearful, and a few men of truly cosmopolitan views neither ignorant nor contemptuous of the West but devoted to their country and the building of socialism. I saw a young man blush when he admitted he was a Komsomol, as if that were a form of time-serving, and finally say to me in mixed Russian and German after a painfully slow conversation and as if this were the ultimate distillation of his generation's experience, "Ili schweigen ili gefangnis" (either silence or prison). And there was still a pall of fear over the few Jews with whom I managed to speak in Moscow.

A Peasant Country

But these were the intellectuals, the elite, the governing circles, the students, the engineers, the technicians, and they are only a very small part of Russia. The first vivid impression stepping out with excitement into the streets that first morning, even in the heart of Moscow, was that this was overwhelmingly and unmistakably a peasant country. The shiny cars, the smart policeman, the overwhelming massiveness of streets and buildings, the strange yellow walled palaces, the huge Bolshoi theatre on the right and the fragment of old medieval wall on the left, the New York style advertising signs selling vitamins and taxi service, the bookshops jammed with technical works in many languages, the swift moving purposeful crowds—none of this struck one so forcibly as the observation that this was a land of peasants, of *East European* peasants, the real peasants, only a few steps from serfdom. I had seen them only once before, in a marketplace in Belgrade, but they were unforgettable—gnarled creatures, almost like trees, leathery, worn by weather and hardship, tough, patient and submissive but stubbornly and subterraneously enduring beneath that submissiveness. Here the streets were filled with them, and they did not look at all like those pictures by *Sovfoto* in which all the faces are washed shiny and smiling. They looked as if they could use soap and water. They were poorly dressed, often in the padded quilt jackets familiar as far east as China, the women with kerchiefs, many with boots, and mostly lean—those paunches that seemed so typical at the airport in Leningrad are rarely seen on the peasants and the ordinary workers difficult to distinguished from them. Where there is fat it is the fat of women whose diet is too largely bread.

Still Holy Moscow

This city of Moscow, their capital, is strange and immense as their country, endlessly fascinating as they are but unlike the people more than slightly repellant. It is not Europe, it is not Asia, it is Russia as America is America; Europe and Asia have affected both but the product is new, sui generis. And it is easy to understand why Peter abandoned it in disgust to build himself a new capital as a window on the West, and why the Panslavist reactionaries of the Nineteenth century dreamed of making it Russia's center again. For despite that marble subway and the new skyscrapers—the overlay of Communist Babbitry engaged in making Moscow the best biggest and Bolshoi-est of all cities, just like America only better is their dream—the old Holy Moscow lies heavy and inescapable

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on the new world center of atheist communism. No city could be more incongruous, jumbled, conglomerate; so bedraggled with the past as it struggles toward the future. The Czars and Commissars alike built to strike the visitor with awe at its immensity; everything at first sight seems huge, even monstrous, almost Egyptian. Then as one looks closer one sees a general slovenliness like that of a peasant giant with his shirt tails out of his pants. Elderly crones like caricatures of womanhood endlessly dibble dabble at the dirt of the streets with wisp-like brooms. The buildings are flaked, poorly painted, in need of repair. Between new apartment houses and skyscrapers one sees the old fashioned Russian log houses like the quaint illustrations in old editions of Pushkin, and in the courtyards behind them are glimpses of slums squalid beyond conception.

The Czars liked size, and so did their successors. The old yellow walled palaces impress with strangeness rather than beauty, and the new skyscrapers and apartment houses are overlaid by doo-dads and petty ornament and pretty pastel bits of color. The new university is a kind of Soviet Empire State Building, impressive and striking but a little boring. "Socialist realism" in architecture is about as vulgar and ostentatious as Miami and just about as socialist; the opulent new Moskva hotel would fit perfectly into the Florida resort if it were not built in such a heavy, old-fashioned, dark kind of way. The taste is the taste of the *nouveaux riches*. In architecture, painting and sculpture, this revolutionary society is utterly non-revolutionary, sterile and tasteless. The visual climax are those neo-classic statues of athletes with—not just loincloths—but full underdrawers of stone on them, and the bits of cloth so prudishly carved across the navels of the Graces. In this, too, Moscow is the most mid-Victorian of capitals.

The Kremlin Dominates All

But all this modern overlay seems surface. The heart and soul of Moscow is still the Kremlin. The eye, the footsteps, are drawn back constantly to the brick-walled medieval battlements of this old fortress town on a bluff which still dominates Moscow militarily and—one feels—spiritually. The Kremlin is a huge place, big enough for the armed trading town it once was, set in the heart of Moscow. The Kremlin is a vast museum and as vast a cemetery and at the same time the center of government, a capital which is also a Mecca, to which the devout from all over the Union turn their steps toward that black square modernist mausoleum just outside the Kremlin walls where Lenin and Stalin lie embalmed side by side like modern Pharaohs to be venerated by a people profoundly necrophile. It is the character of the Kremlin as a tomb that is so unexpected and revealing. If Stalin's portrait is still everywhere, and his body lies undisturbed in state, this is easier to understand after one has visited the Kremlin church in which Ivan lies beside the son he killed and Peter is interred near the son he had executed—for being a "reactionary" as my Komsomolka guide explained. The Russians are used to crimes in their rulers; they are a people like Job who seek patiently in suffering to find some meaning in the inexplicable cruelties of Heaven.

A Deeply Religious People

Red Square with the brooding Kremlin, the gay candy-stick pillars of that child's delight, St. Basil's, the modernist mausoleum as black, stark and strange as something out of a science fiction nightmare, and the big department store across the way—what could be more jumbled, more incongruous, more confusing! I believe that some day Communist Russia will abandon Moscow as Peter did, and for much the same reasons—to escape the dead hand of the past, to open fresh windows on the world. But all this paradox and piety is Russia. On a Saturday afternoon I stood in line with the patient to see Lenin and Stalin, and the next day I saw the same devotion in the solemn beauty of the Russian Orthodox mass as it was being celebrated in Moscow's crowded churches. It is the Russian people to whom one feels drawn with love, still half-barbaric, deeply religious whether as Christians or Communists, capable of much senseless cruety, and of the deepest devotion. This Russia, Holy Russia in a new sense to the world's Left intellectuals, is unmistakably backward, no model for the future, Byzantine, slavish and submissive, still enmired in the past, but a giant from whom given peace there will be giant accomplishment. So much for this first report.

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